

Pastor's Pen: The Call of Christ So Many Need to Hear

Early on in Jesus' public ministry, according to the Gospel of Mark, *"This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel"* (Mark 1:15). Everything Jesus says and does from that point on is directed towards this dual end. He preaches a Gospel to show us what the life of one who wishes to enter the Kingdom of Heaven looks like and offers us the chance to repent of our sinfulness. It was not a popular message in the time of Jesus nor is it now. Consider that this message was meant initially for those who already claimed to love God as was prescribed by the law of Moses. But these people, for thousands of years, kept falling short – if they tried at all.

The law of Moses spelled out for the Jews what being in a familial bond with God looked like. That bond was simple, "I will be your God and you will be my people." They, by conforming their lives after the love of God, were to be witnesses to the nations. They were to be a draw that would allow the nations to seek God out as well. But the Jews struggled with this. The draw to be like the other nations was so very powerful that they would become indistinguishable from the foreign nations who were not in any relationship with God. Time and again, God would send judges and prophets to call His holy people back to Himself. Time and again, they would murder those prophets until God finally lifted His protecting hand from them and they were destroyed, as we hear in this weekend's first reading.

Yet even then, God simply cannot abandon his beloved people even though they had abandoned Him. After exile, they were brought home. An anointed savior (aka Messiah or Christ) would be sent to them, in time, to once again turn their hearts back to the Lord. However, as Jesus foretold many times, they would treat Him as they treated the prophets and kill Him as well. The Father knew this would come to pass, but this time, because it was His Son acting in perfect obedience to His will, born out of love for us, this death would take the place of us. Having done this, on the day of the resurrection, Jesus appeared to the 11 apostles and gave them the duty and authority to forgive sins in His name (see John 21:21-23). For the better part of 2,000 years, the Church has had that authority, duty, and will until Christ shall come again. She exercises that authority and duty through the Sacrament of Reconciliation and through the ongoing proclamation of the Gospel.

The more things change....

Human nature is amazingly consistent. We might have new toys, new technologies, and new languages, but the basic nature of humanity is always a constant. What the Jews struggled with in the Old Testament still plagues us today. We still struggle with the call to holiness and the call to ongoing conversion. We still struggle with being a light to the nations and not indistinguishable from those who are not of our faith. The "we" is intentional. This is not just a struggle for the laity, but a struggle for the clergy as well. As the old Greek saying goes, "The fish rots at the head first."

Over the course of the last 70 years the call to conversion has been muted. Getting people to go to confession is often as hard as getting priests to offer the sacrament. The call of witness and conversion – at the core of the message of Jesus – was drowned out by the banal pablum of “I’m OK, you’re OK” and like-pop psychobabble. When a priest finally comes along who is willing to do his duty and offer that core of the life of ongoing conversion (and preach about it) it falls on deaf ears. There is nothing new in this. People now have the same response to the call as they did with Jesus and with the prophets of old. As I said, human nature is amazingly consistent.

Our culture is really no different than the worldly culture started at the fall in Eden. We constantly struggle with the temptation to be our own gods. We constantly struggle with using self-serving justifications to not just form our own morality but to justify our animus towards anything or anyone who would call us back into an authentic relationship with God set on His terms. Why should it be His terms? Because heaven is His abode. It is His undeserved offer to us for eternal love and the joy it brings. Heaven is not the ultimate participation trophy of a life marginally lived or even selfishly lived. It is for those who reflected His love to Him and to others. No more than the Jews were allowed to keep the Promised Land while they rejected the covenant, can we expect to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven while rejecting the Gospel and the covenant bond it establishes for all time. To reject ongoing conversion and reconciliation in this life is to reject heaven in the next.

If today you hear His voice....

The call to conversion is a call that recognizes we are capable of better, that we are not slaves to our senses, appetites, or passions. It is not the call of a slave master to his slaves, but the call of a dad to his children. I personally love the vision we are given in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) of a heartbroken father so very desperate to see his wayward son’s silhouette break the horizon, so desperate to be reconciled, that the penitential words of his son barely make out of the boy’s mouth before the father has run and hugged him. God doesn’t call us to ongoing conversion because we are essentially bad, but because He wants us closer to Him. He gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation so we could come back home. He calls us to ongoing conversion so we don’t stray from the protection of His home.

The first step is always the hardest. We live in a world and society that constantly pumps the raw sewage of a lie into our hearts: you are perfect, all your actions are perfect, and even if they are not, you should not have to apologize for anything. It swells us with a delusional pride for the one purpose of keeping us away from God. It fills us with fear of returning. It turns our hearts to stone. However, as the prophet Ezekiel relays, God says to His exiled people, *“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”* (Ezekiel 36:26) Embrace the truth in humility and allow the Lord to break the chains of your slavery and restore you to your rightful home. *“If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.”* (Psalm 84:8)